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ABSTRACT

Political tolerance is the willingness to extend basic rights and civil liberties to persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own. It is a central tenet of a liberal democracy. The individual rights and freedoms that U.S. citizens value encourage a wide array of ideas and beliefs, some of which may offend segments of the population. The expression of those beliefs is protected by another core democratic principle, that of majority rule with respect for the rights of individuals or groups in the minority. Without safeguards for the free expression of divergent opinions, we risk a tyranny of the majority. In a free and open society, public deliberation exposes "bad" ideas instead of suppressing them. The protection of individuals' rights, including those of individuals we dislike or with whom we strongly disagree, has often been a struggle in U.S. society. Consider the interment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the interrogation of suspected American Communists in the 1950s, or the FBI files on Vietnam War protesters. In each case, U.S. citizens tended to support the abnegation of rights for unpopular minorities. Opposition to intolerance and support for minority rights among the populace, however, can be developed through effective teaching of political tolerance in elementary and secondary schools. This digest discusses: (1) findings of research on political tolerance; (2) guidelines on teaching for political tolerance; and (3) positive consequences of effective teaching for political tolerance. (Contains 10 references.) (BB)

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Developing Political Tolerance

By Patricia G. Avery

Political tolerance is the willingness to extend basic rights and civil liberties to persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own. It is a central tenet of a liberal democracy. The individual rights and freedoms that U.S. citizens value encourage a wide array of ideas and beliefs, some of which may offend segments of the population. The expression of those beliefs is protected by another core democratic principle, that of majority rule with respect for the rights of individuals or groups in the minority. Without safeguards for the free expression of divergent opinions, we risk a tyranny of the majority. In a free and open society, public deliberation exposes "bad" ideas instead of suppressing them.

The protection of individuals' rights, including those of individuals we dislike or with whom we strongly disagree, has often been a struggle in U.S. society. Consider the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the interrogation of suspected American Communists in the 1950s, or the FBI files on Vietnam War protesters. In each case, Americans tended to support the abnegation of rights for unpopular minorities. Opposition to intolerance and support for minority rights among the populace, however, can be developed through effective teaching of political tolerance in elementary and secondary schools. This Digest discusses (1) findings of research on political tolerance, (2) guidelines on teaching for political tolerance, and (3) positive consequences of effective teaching for political tolerance.

Research on Political Tolerance. For almost 50 years, political scientists have tracked an interesting paradox in American attitudes: over 90% of U.S. citizens profess a strong belief in democratic principles such as freedom of speech and assembly. When asked whether they would be willing to extend these rights to groups whose ideas they find deplorable, however, typically only about one-third to one-half respond affirmatively. Although the objects of U.S. intolerance have shifted over the years, the gap between support for civil liberties in the abstract and support for granting civil liberties to disliked groups has remained fairly constant.

Studies of adults indicate that psychological characteristics play a much more important role in influencing tolerance levels than do traditional demographic characteristics such as social status, income, and residence. Individuals with higher self-esteem, who are less dogmatic and less authoritarian, tend to better withstand the "threat" of ideas at odds with their own. Level of education achieved also consistently predicts a person's level of tolerance. Post-secondary educational experiences in particular may help people become more comfortable with diverse beliefs. These experiences tend to increase self-esteem and to lower dogmatism and authoritarianism (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus 1982).

Among adolescents, political tolerance tends to be associated with older age, higher moral reasoning, higher empathy, and higher self-esteem. Tolerant students tend to make connections between abstract democratic principles and concrete situations, to take multiple perspectives, and to see alternative solutions to problems. Intolerant students have difficulty relating principles to practice or seeing beyond their own viewpoint. They tend to define problems in absolutist terms, with clear "right" and "wrong" answers. Even tolerant students, however, have difficulty moving beyond mere platitudes in explaining the importance of democratic principles such as freedom of expression (e.g., "Freedom of expression is important because we live in a free country") (Avery 1992).

Secondary school experiences *can* increase students' level of political tolerance, but their impact tends to be far less significant than that of post-secondary experiences because while college instruction tends to highlight divergent perspectives, secondary teachers and textbooks have traditionally avoided conflict. A serious examination of the role of tolerance in a democracy entails looking at extremist or unconventional political and social beliefs. Teaching tolerance is thus inherently controversial; however, studies indicate that when curricula are specifically designed to teach young people about the role of tolerance in a democracy, levels of tolerance can increase (Avery, Bird, Johnstone, Sullivan, & Thalhammer 1992; Goldenson 1978; Thalhammer, Wood, Bird, Avery & Sullivan 1994).

Guidelines on Teaching for Political Tolerance. The research suggests the following guidelines about teaching for political tolerance:

1. Examine the "slogans of democracy." The notion of "freedom of speech" may be held as dear as "mom and apple pie" until it is extended to groups that offend your core beliefs. What is freedom of speech? Why is it important in a democratic society? Are there limits to freedom of speech? Who decides?

2. Make explicit connections between abstract civil liberties and concrete situations. Students can explore the historical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of intolerance through case studies. Why have some groups denied rights to others? Why do people join these groups? What has been the short- and long-term impact of intolerance on the perpetrator, the victim, and society?

3. Teach how individual rights are embedded in the U.S. Constitution. Young people quickly learn the phrase "majority rule," but they are much less likely to include "with respect for minority rights." Why is it particularly important that the rights of individuals in the minority be protected? What are those rights that deserve protection? Draw connections to the International Declaration of Human Rights to show students that certain rights are recognized as basic at the international level (Avery & Others 1993).

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4. Differentiate between *acknowledging* a person's right to express dissident views and *approving* of the person's views. There are many social and political groups whose perspectives we would not want students to adopt. Students should understand that they have the right to express their opposition to ideas with which they disagree.

5. When teaching about tolerance for diversity of belief, it is particularly important to use teaching and learning strategies that give students opportunities to consider multiple perspectives, such as role plays, simulations, and structured controversies. Without experiencing different viewpoints in the classroom, students are unlikely to appreciate their value as well as their complexity.

Although it is critical that issues related to tolerance be addressed in the curriculum, it is just as important that students explore such issues in an open classroom climate. It would be counterproductive to use case studies of intolerance in a classroom environment that is itself intolerant of divergent viewpoints. In three international studies, students' level of political tolerance has been associated with their perception of an open classroom climate, one in which they feel free and secure to express their ideas and opinions (Hahn 1998; Nielson 1977; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz 2001). It appears that when students see that their teachers are interested in multiple perspectives, when they feel their own ideas are respected, and when they regularly listen to different viewpoints, they are more tolerant of diverse beliefs.

Consequences of Effective Teaching for Political Tolerance. Taking a tolerant stance is one of the more difficult tasks citizens face in a society. We are not born tolerant, but must learn to be tolerant. Adolescence is potentially a very important time for the development of political tolerance because during this period, most young people are developing the capacity to apply abstract principles to concrete situations, they have a heightened curiosity about social and political issues, and they are keenly interested in their increasing rights and responsibilities as young adults.

Social studies educators are charged with developing an enlightened citizenry. Enlightened citizens do more than "lip-synch to the tune of democracy." Enlightened citizens understand the role of tolerance in a democratic society and are committed to practicing tolerance and respect for minority rights (Thalhammer, Wood, Bird, Avery & Sullivan 1994). The research suggests that adolescents can become enlightened citizens, but that it will take much effort and ongoing commitment among social studies educators to realize this goal.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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